

"The Powers That Be"



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New York City
January 28, 1917



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“The Powers That Be”



“Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God.”—Romans 13:1.

This text has often been a stumbling-block. It has been used, time out of mind, to bolster up doctrines repellent to freedom, doctrines such as that of the divine right of kings and the passive obedience of subjects. Needless to say, St. Paul had no such teaching in mind. There was never a sincerer champion than he of human freedom. There are no writings where we find enunciated with more passionate conviction the views concerning liberty, fraternity and equality which are the foundation stones of democratic states. Whatever St. Paul is preaching, we may be sure that he is not preaching anything which is out of accordance with his lifelong principles and practice. We must make his spirit the criterion by which to judge the meaning of his words.

Taking them in this large and liberal way, the Apostle's meaning becomes clear. What he is talking about is the Christian's duty to the state, to civil authority in general, and specifically to the authority of the Roman Empire. What he teaches is that civil government is a divine appointment, and that disobedience to it, when unwarranted by conscience, involves not only political disloyalty but also defiance of God. “The powers that be are ordained of God.” In a general sense, the truth of this saying is apparent. In a general sense, the Roman Empire was a divine ordinance. It maintained law and order throughout the vast extent of its dominions. It protected property and person. It enforced peace. St. Paul was proud of his Roman citizenship, and had reason to be grateful for it. On more than one occasion it was the instrument by which he was protected from mob violence,

his life saved and his ministry prolonged. So he inculcates a spirit, a spirit not of blind and servile submission, but of wide-awake and conscientious obedience. The Christian is to be a loyal subject, a punctual tax-payer, and a good citizen. Wherever his conscience permits, he is to be found upholding the civil power, not opposing it.

Is not St. Paul right? Are not these things one aspect of religion? Which is Christian, the furious mob of lynchers storming at the doors of the gaol to get at the convicted offender, or the Governor who stands between them and their prey, and tells them they must lynch him first? The men who stand for law and for the processes of law are the true patriots both of the secular commonwealth and of that spiritual commonwealth which we term the Kingdom of God.

I think it evident from the connection that this, in a general way, is what the Apostle had in mind. For notice the connection. His precept of obedience to the powers that be comes immediately after his prohibition of private vengeance. "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath." Here we see what is, perhaps, the greatest of the functions of the state. The state prohibits the wreaking of private vengeance. It steps between, and takes the administration of justice into its own hands. In a lawless community every man is his own avenger. If he is wronged, or if he imagines himself wronged, he takes the matter up himself and obtains such satisfaction as he is able. The disadvantage of this personal method of settlement is obvious. There is no place in it for justice. Quarrels are settled quite without reference to right or wrong, and solely upon the basis of superior strength. Might determines right. Might even attempts to determine questions of conscience. The Jews, for example, had a dispute with St. Paul about a question of theology. Not being able to convince him by their arguments, they attempted to establish the validity of their position by murdering him, as they had murdered his predecessor St. Stephen. No wonder that he felt grateful to the calm, impassive civil authority which took him under its protection and guaranteed to him a fair trial! The powers that be were ordained to put a stop to terrorism, to anarchy, to forcible settlement of questions which ought not to be

decided by force. To this extent at least he felt that they were ordained of God.

And to this extent at least, and no doubt to a very much greater extent, civil authority is ordained of God, and human government possesses divine sanctions. We ought therefore to do what St. Paul did. We ought to recognize the fact with appreciation, and with feelings of obligation. It is a very great thing, greater than any of us realizes, to live in an orderly society, and to possess the blessings of stable government. It is not a little thing that our persons are protected, that our property cannot be taken away from us without due process of law, that we can go with confidence and security upon our lawful occasions. The powers that be are upon the side of order. They stand for the administration of justice. They stand for the public welfare, and for the public peace. When justice miscarries, when public welfare is endangered, when public peace is disturbed, it is usually through no fault of the civil authority, but in spite of its efforts to maintain order. So we owe to it not only recognition, but also loyal obedience. We ought to pay our taxes cheerfully. We ought to assume willingly all the duties of citizenship, jury duty included. We ought to obey the law which prohibits undue speed for motor vehicles, even where we are not restrained by the suspicion that a policeman on a motor cycle may be following close behind!

We ought also to be restrained and decent in our criticism of public officials. This may sound like a counsel of perfection, but in a democracy like ours it is sorely needed. The unmeasured and unmerited abuse which is heaped upon public men, out of the spite and bitterness of partisan spirit, is one of the scandals of democracy. It keeps I do not know how many sensitive and honorable men from entering upon public life. It makes life a burden for many who do enter it, often from highest and most disinterested motives. I know of few things more unpatriotic than to cultivate a temper of deliberate hostility toward those who are in positions of authority, to make up one's mind in advance that what they say must be wrong because it is they who say it, and that what they do must be opposed because it is they who do it. This is the very spirit of self-will and anarchy against which St. Paul's

injunction is levelled. It needs only a little reflection to perceive that if such a temper were to become general, it would make short shrift for all effective government.

So much for the positive bearing of St. Paul's injunction. Now for a glance at one of its larger and more far-reaching implications.

"The powers that be are ordained of God." They are not, then, self-originated. They are not self-determined. This is no doctrine of the divine right of kings, or of the absolute authority of the state. Far from being above good and evil, as a vicious modern philosophy proclaims it, the state, the civil authority, is ordained to minister to human welfare as the instrument of the Divine Will, and must be judged accordingly, and, where need is evident, must be shaped and altered accordingly. If, for example, the existing forms of political organization are carrying out the purposes for which they were ordained, if they are administering justice, maintaining law and order, safeguarding the rights and liberties of their citizens, and making due provision for the rights and liberties and interests of other states, well and good. But if, through some inherent defect, they are unable to execute these aims, then the defect must be brought to light and corrected. We know that at the present time some grave defect exists. We know the defect to be so grave that it has plunged half the world into a gigantic war. Now is the time for Christian men to use not only their hearts and sympathies but also to use their brains, to think with all the power and lucidity that God has given them, and to formulate, even if for the time being only on paper, some new order, some new type of political organization, some revolutionary change in the social structure, which shall enable the powers that be to carry out more perfectly the great, orderly, pacific purposes for which they are ordained of God. For as the world is constituted, the vision inevitably must precede the realization, and the formulation of far-reaching plans for concerted action is the indispensable prelude to their accomplishment.

Let me give a single illustration of this principle, taken from our own national history. At the dawn of our history as a nation, the powers that be, represented by the civil authorities in the several States, were not co-ordinated. They

were not welded together by a perception of their common interests. The thirteen newly constituted States were united by their common hatred of Great Britain, but they disliked one another only a shade or two less. We read American history, and we find that at this early period Connecticut and Pennsylvania were at swords' points over the possession of the valley of Wyoming. New York and New Hampshire had a similar dispute over the possession of the Green Mountains. The City of New York "obliged every Yankee sloop and every New Jersey market boat to pay entrance fees and obtain clearances at the custom-house, just as was done by ships coming from London and Hamburg."* Connecticut business men retaliated by suspending commercial intercourse with New York. The United States were united only in name, and to all appearance they were drifting into anarchy.

Then we know what happened. After the revolution which secured our liberty, there came a bloodless revolution which secured our unity. There were thirteen weak, jealous, quarrelsome, nearly bankrupt communities, armed against each other with menacing force, and with tariffs that were meant for protection and that resulted in prostration. They buried their antipathies, pooled their resources, and created one great, sovereign, solvent federation. I do not think that any one can fail to perceive that this coming together of the States was providential. The nation could stand, as the States severally were not able to stand, for law and order. The nation could be, in a far wider and deeper sense than the several States could possibly be, the minister of God.

Now I do not think that it requires any undue strain upon our imaginations to see that there is a certain parallelism between our present situation and that of our American forefathers, and that their solution of their problem may cast some light upon our solution of ours. The critical period in United States history was the period just subsequent to the War of Independence. The critical period in the history of modern civilization will be the period just after the close of the European war. The task then was to find some way in which the States could be leagued together and prevented from drifting into anarchy. The task now will be to find some way in which

*John Fiske: *Critical Period of United States History*.

the powers can be leagued together—not, of course, under one central government: that is neither possible nor in the least desirable—but in some fashion which will enable them to take concerted action wherever common interests are concerned. Liberals the world over are giving earnest attention to this gigantic problem. No less than thirty solutions of it have already been proposed. It is said that these projects are idealistic. Is that a condemnation of them? The proposal to create an American nation was idealistic at the time. At least within the Christian Church, proposals of this character can scarcely be condemned for any such objection. The purpose for which the Church of Christ exists is to make ideals real.

The real difficulty lies in another quarter. A World's Court, a League of Nations, a League to Enforce Peace, is just as strong, or just as weak, as the public convictions which it registers. Where there is a worldwide will to peace, the will will find the way. Where there is the will to war, no political machinery, however ingeniously contrived, can permanently prevent war. It may retard it. It may put obstacles in the way of it. It may make it costly to the aggressor. That is the most that its advocates can claim for it, and the most that its sober advocates do claim. Without the right spirit, the spirit of forbearance and of international good will, machinery of this sort might even degenerate into an obstacle to peace. We have an historic instance in the ill-fated Holy Alliance. The Holy Alliance was formed almost exactly one hundred years ago, at the close of the Napoleonic wars, under the most hopeful auspices, and having as its definite object the preservation of everlasting peace. We are all familiar with the sequel. In the hands of Prince Metternich it speedily became an instrument of tyranny and repression. It crushed popular revolutions in Naples, Piedmont and France. It restored absolutism in its most offensive form to the throne of Spain. It attempted to widen the sphere of its operations to the New World, and to bring back Spain's revolted colonies to their old allegiance. Then our Munroe Doctrine was formulated as a counterblast to these pretensions, and the Munroe Doctrine saved the Western Hemisphere from the enforcement of peace at the cost of liberty.

What we need, then, is to go farther afield than any political machinery can take us, even so promising a political device as a League to Enforce Peace. The origins of war and peace lie in the hearts of the peoples of the world. They are to be found in their general attitude toward one another, in motives of good will or in motives of aggression, in carefully cultivated friendship or in thoughtlessly provoked hostility. A nation's real influence, its true position, do not rest solely, and perhaps not even chiefly, upon force. They rest chiefly, I think, upon imponderable things. They rest upon what, for want of a closer definition, we may term the national character. It is the character of a country, its reputation for honor, for high ideals, for fair and generous dealing, which in all difficult and delicate negotiations ultimately determine the measure of its usefulness.

Now negatively, this should mean to us national self restraint. A nation which is cherishing large aims of service and of mediation cannot afford to show itself boorish. We ought accordingly to find some way to curb the glib and irresponsible demagogues who are continually jumping up and predicting foreign invasion. One day it is to be by the Japanese, the next day by the British, the next day by the Germans. They change with every wind that blows, like the weather-cocks they are. But these things do not read well when they are reported by a foreign press. Suspicion engenders suspicion, and threats are encountered by threats.

We ought also to find some way to restrain the periodicals which resort to the same tactics in order to promote their sales upon the day of rest and gladness. I think that it would be an excellent thing if business men were to wait upon the publishers of jingo newspapers and point out to them that all this wild and incendiary talk is not only bad morality but also bad business, and that business men can scarcely be expected to encourage the circulation of periodicals which are insulting their customers, whether their customers live at home or abroad.

And then, too, we ought to watch most carefully all the little bills which are introduced into Congress for the express purpose of insulting some foreign power. It is a great deal

easier to head these things off at the start than to wait for the State Department to adjust and to explain.

Positively, what we can do to provide the right atmosphere for future developments is to exhibit national courtesy. Solomon tells us that to have friends a man must show himself friendly. That is exactly as true of nations as of individuals. To have friends a nation must show itself friendly. It was a courteous thing to call the Argentine Republic, Brazil and Chile into conference with us concerning affairs in Mexico. It did more to promote good relations with Latin America than anything which has happened in a hundred years. It would be a courteous thing if we were to go farther, and settle the just claims of the Colombian Republic. Nothing is to be gained by dickering and delay.

And far beyond mere courtesy, there lies open to us, in Europe's immeasurable need, an immeasurable opportunity for kindness. It has been suggested that in addition to gifts which come from private sources we should make a great public appropriation to help meet the need. There is precedent for such action. Even if there were not, we could create a precedent. A public gift of one hundred million dollars to relieve distress within the French Republic would be a fitting recognition of the service that France rendered to us at the very beginning of our national history. Given to a single nation to which we are bound in spirit by a thousand cherished and subtle sympathies, it would make for international good will. It would be one slight but definite indication that a new day is dawning upon the world, that a new way is being discovered for nations to regard one another and to deal with one another, and that behind the noble definition which the President has made of American ideals and principles, there lies an eagerness, a generosity, a readiness to serve and give, which is in keeping with the loftiest traditions of the land we hold most dear.

